

Life in the plague times: how fairs a metaphysic of persons in the kingdom of new pandemonia?¹

Simon Smith²

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Correspondence: Simon Smith, e:
simonsmithdphil@gmail.com.

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Abstract

In early 2020, Agamben asked a number of important moral and political questions concerning the global response to coronavirus. The response was heated; sufficiently so to prompt the editors of *Inscriptions* to ask whether that response had not, "put our ability to reason calmly and clearly in peril." Motivated by sympathy for all sides of the debate, the aim of our present, brief, rumination is to consider these concerns in light of the ways circumstances have actually unfolded since they were raised. While Agamben's fears may not correspond very precisely with the reality of the situation, those fears are, nonetheless, entirely legitimate. Crucially, Agamben reminds us, there is much in our collective response to coronavirus to be ashamed of; not least, the ways in which isolation and separation have been used to reinforce a disastrous individualism. In sickness or in health, we abandon one another at our peril.

Keywords: pandemic; Agamben; ethics; political theory; religion

When, in the first months of 2020, Agamben wrote his lovely slender articles, two of which were reprinted under the title, "Giorgio Agamben on health scare and the religion of science,"³ some people, although not very many, had already died from coronavirus. *Nota bene*, being a number in a low body-count is, one supposes, of little comfort to the counted. However, Agamben is not blasé about those deaths. He is more concerned with the circumstances and attitudes they imply. He is more concerned, for example, with the fact that people have been allowed to die alone and uncomforted than with the cause of death. Hardly surprising, since circumstance and attitude are where the deeper moral questions lie. His job, as he points out, is "not to give opinions on the gravity of the disease, but to ask about [...] ethical and political consequences."⁴

How sharp their teeth, those political consequences; how hungry they are when they come back to bite us. Here is the rub: Agamben is not, or not only, fearful of the present, "but what comes after." A certain nervousness with regard to political freedom is forgivable. Italian governments are not now and never have been above flirting with fascists and fascism. Agamben himself was born during the most famous totalitarian orgy in recent history. What's more, the 21st century has already seen an alarmingly energetic rightwards thrust across Europe and, indeed, globally. That everyone has forgotten the dangers of right-wing politics is

¹A version of this essay was originally posted on the British Personalist Forum blog (<https://britishpersonalistforum.blogspot.com/>) as part of a longer rumination, the title of which is too ridiculous to repeat in a respectable scholarly journal. The author would like to express his gratitude to the editors of *Inscriptions* for the opportunity to present his thoughts on the matter to a wider audience under a more sensible heading.

²British Personalist Forum.

³*Inscriptions*, "Giorgio Agamben on health scare and the religion of science," *Inscriptions* 3, no. 2 (July 2020): 72, <https://www.tankebanen.no/inscriptions/index.php/inscriptions/issue/view/5>.

⁴This and next, Agamben, 3.

both terrifying and mystifying. (Well, perhaps not so mystifying when one considers the role of the Catholic Church in inciting violence against Polish LGBTQ* and feminist groups; it is, as others have pointed out before, a matter of power and the fear of being forced to share it with the other.) Even the discharging of America's most recent aspiring dictator has, in reality, only seen a return to so-called 'centrist' politics, where the 'centre' is most definitely right-of-centre.

Writing, as I am, in the UK, I am naturally entitled to the moral high ground when it comes to all such political oppression and corruption. Let the rest of the world acquiesce in a state of exception and embrace curfews more severe and more restrictive even than those experienced during WWII. Let them endorse their governments' declaration of "the most absurd of wars:" viz. "a war with an invisible enemy that can lurk in every other person," "a civil war." (One cannot help thinking, somehow, of that other absurd, and ultimately lost, war, the War on Drugs.) Let them do all this, for I live under a government that would never attempt to bypass democratic institutions in the name of reclaiming power for those institutions from invented oppression by a "foreign power" which has been characterised by the liberal, or rather neoliberal, application of ersatz Churchillian rhetoric. Or mislead the electorate about: a) £350 million a week for the NHS; and b) the "oven-ready deal" that would secure those millions. Or seek to enact domestic legislation designed to simultaneously override and undermine international law. Or attempt to bully its nearest neighbour into accepting deeply disadvantageous terms in order to bolster its own position while preparing to take a massive dump on an historic peace accord which itself was necessitated by a conveniently forgotten colonial past, a past which, although consigned to ancient history by some, to others is very much alive.

Quite so. How thankful I am to live in a country in which such low blackguardism is entirely alien, or should we say *foreign*. Let joy be unconfined.

"Horn of a bull, hoof of a horse, smile of a Saxon," as Joyce said.⁵

Having ventilated thus, let us return to Agamben at the plague hospital. He is, I think, correct to remind us that "fear is a poor advisor"⁶ – no irony intended here – and that nothing generates fear more efficiently than a perceived threat to one's survival. Indeed? Not quite. In fact, the underlying point is surely that the greatest fear arises from a perceived threat to our most cherished and deeply held convictions. Naturally so, since those convictions are, most often, the constitutive lode of one's identity, layers of a sedimentary self. Agamben's point here is that the rock of those convictions – formerly social, moral, political, etc. – has been abandoned in favour of a commitment to survival alone or, as he terms it, faith in "bare life." Blind fingers grab in panic for "bare life;" frantic with fear and, worse, overwhelmed by base desire: to live and nothing more is mere instinct, the desire of beasts and broccoli, not human beings. "Bare life" and the fear of losing it threatens to isolate us from one another as we begin to regard one another, not as human beings but as disease vectors. Shivering tentacles of terror clutch and drag us down, silencing conscience and consciousness as we gladly acquiesce in the dark depths of instinct and animal existence. That, as Austin Farrer averred, is virtually a definition of sin.⁷

This risk, if real, is far greater than that, of course. Isolated, we begin to lose our humanity altogether; for, humanity is a social construct, a shared belief, not set in stone but inscribed on the leaves of our autobiography. What makes us human, what makes us ourselves, does not survive in one or with one. It needs others to reflect and refract, to correct, and to construct it. We need co-authors, libraries of life-stories interleaving with our own. Literally and metaphorically, which is to say, metaphysically and biologically, humanity is born out of real intercourse. Abandon that and what remains is surely a poor excuse for a human life, framed by fear of the dark, consumed utterly by the demands of survival and nothing but. Here we are on the precipice. What shall we do? Skulk back into chthonic undergrowth of a bestial past? Fling ourselves faithfully into the void to be sustained by wings of angels? Or shall we do as Camus asks and live where we stand, cheerfully, like human beings?

Agamben places the blame for this state of affairs squarely on the shoulders of the medical sciences. It is they, he suggests, that have "split the unity of our vital experience, which is always inseparably bodily and spiritual, into a purely biological entity on one hand and an affective and cultural life on the other."⁸ It is they who implanted the dualism that lives in the bone of all our thought and action. I do not doubt his word on this. I am certain that our friend and occasional contributor to the British Personalist Forum blog, James Beauregard, would wholeheartedly agree too; it is, after all the message which underpins his bioethical efforts. That said, we should keep in mind that the medical sciences have not worked alone.

Separatism, dualism, and manufactured antagonism, that "split [in] the unity of our vital experience," these have an ancient pedigree. Dusty philosophical fingers point in Descartes' direction, he and those who blithely

⁵James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2010), 22. The Joyce Project has an excellent and extensively annotated text available at <http://www.joyceproject.com/#>.

⁶Agamben, 3.

⁷See Austin Farrer, *Finite and Infinite* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1959), 207.

⁸Agamben, 4.

promulgate his realist non-sense; not far behind stands Aristotle, boldly bearded, tackle out. Lest we be accused of bias, we know very well that logical coincidence makes idealism almost as bad. (Both of which forms of old toot, by the way, the Personalists will frequently and happily be found purveying.) We could also point to behaviourism here, the philosophical kind; but since behaviourists have enough trouble trying to work out who said what, let us be kind to them. Besides, the Church provides plenty more grist for our mill. Agamben accuses the Bride of Christ of having “radically repudiated its most essential principles:” visiting and caring for the sick.⁹ To be fair, Pope Francis is *supposed* to be a radical. One might also point to the classical doctrine *Contemptus Mundi* and the necessitarian logic underpinning our Western, Aristotelised version of Christianity. The Schoolmen taught us that contingency is quite literally *nothing* before the transcendent majesty, the sheer unutterable reality of Necessary Being. They also taught us that sickness and misfortune are ordained from on high.¹⁰ Perhaps, then, this is all just a matter of intellectual consistency.

And should we mention the cult of radical individualism, born out of economic and political neoliberalism, which almost entirely saturates our lives? Should we mention the feverish demand for constant competition, grounded as it is, in Neo-Darwinist dog-eat-dog dogma?¹¹ It is, after all, as good a way as any of separating that “which is always inseparably bodily and spiritual.” But let’s not labour the point.

The dangers of isolation and of deifying science are very real and very serious. There is no gainsaying Agamben on that. On the other hand, consider, for a moment, how the situation has actually played out. Agamben fears a retreat from real human contact, substituting at every possible opportunity interaction mediated by technology, pathological and impersonal. Very well, but here in the UK we have also seen public demonstrations, crowds of people coming together, perhaps unwisely, to protest against both mask-wearing requirements and institutional racism. There have been house parties of hundreds and pubs filled to bursting; the British people have taken to the streets to lick one another’s faces for the sheer joy of it. Meanwhile our government, far from striving to restrict our freedom of movement has been desperate to get everyone out of their houses as quickly as possible, first with the ‘Eat Out to Help Out’ discount scheme, then with injunctions to Get Back to School and, irritatingly, to Get Back to Work (irritating, because those of us forced to work at home since March have, by the strongest possible implication, not *been* working.)

And yet, given the continued rise in the number of infections across Europe and, perhaps especially, the United States, isolation and separation may not, in reality, have been the problem. Quite the opposite, in fact.

⁹Agamben, 4.

¹⁰See Wendy C. Hamblet, *Punishment and Shame: a Philosophical Study* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2011), Chapter 9 ‘A Christian Penology’, 125–134.

¹¹Robert Newman, *The Entirely Accurate Encyclopaedia of Evolution* (Glasgow: Freight Books, 2015), ‘Group Selection’.

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